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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PANAMA 002661

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR WHA/CEN

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [PM](#) [LABOR](#) [HUMAN](#) [RIGHTS](#) [POLMIL](#)

SUBJECT: PANAMA PROTESTS: THE STORY BEHIND BOCAS VIOLENCE

REF: PANAMA 892

Classified By: CHARGE CMC MULLEN for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

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SUMMARY  
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1. (C) A peaceful protest in a north coast town far from the capital against an electric company veered into violence on October 24 after a radical group exploited local tensions and attacked the national police (PNP) with iron bars and Molotov cocktails, injuring 28 people including 24 officers. The PNP released all 22 detainees after the incident on a judge's order, who cited improper arrest procedures. The GOP continues its dialog with the local community to reduce the prospect of more violence. This confrontation revealed a key PNP vulnerability -- i.e., its inability to respond effectively to violence in remote areas. It is a vulnerability that mischief-makers, including radical labor leaders, could exploit to their advantage. End Summary.

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DISGUST WITH BANANA COMPANY'S ELECTRICAL SERVICE  
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2. (U) On October 22, several hundred irate residents of Almirante, Bocas del Toro blocked the road connecting the plantations of the Bocas Fruit Company (BFC) to the capital with burning tires and 55 gallon drums filled with stones. The BFC supplies Bocas residents with electricity and potable water. Residents already frustrated with a thirteen-hour power and water outage, turned to protest when a power surge caused a fire that gutted several apartment buildings. The power outage had disabled the town's water system and firefighters lacked water to extinguish the blaze.

3. (U) Earlier this month, Almirante and other Bocas residents blocked the BFC road in a peaceful protest after the BFC raised the price of electricity. Following high-level GOP intervention, the residents opened the road after the BFC agreed to reverse the price hike.

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BAD COPS INFILTRATE PROTEST...  
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4. (C) According to one government account, on October 24 the peaceful protest turned violent because former PNP officer and convicted drug trafficker Nazario (or Nazareno) Silvano Gonzalez and dozens of his cronies infiltrated the peaceful protesters. Gonzalez's followers included other former PNP officers dismissed for drug offenses. When PNP officers attempted to clear the road with tear gas, criminal elements threw Molotov cocktails, stones, and fireworks. They attacked PNP officers with metal bars, breaking arms and legs. They also kidnapped three PNP officers and held them for five hours. Some 28 people were injured, some of them seriously, including 24 police officers. According to one governmental source, the original community marchers withdrew from the protest when it turned violent. Government officials believe Gonzalez escaped to Costa Rica.

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...OR WAS IT A LEFTIST UNION?  
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5. (C) According to other police and government sources, leftist construction workers union SUNTRACS (see reftel) joined the protest on October 23 and incited the group to violence. Police observed the Bocas SUNTRACS leader and numerous red SUNTRACS flags at the scene.

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DETAINEES RELEASED, CLAIM POLICE ABUSE  
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16. (SBU) The PNP detained 22 people in connection with the protests. Despite Minister of Government and Justice Hector Aleman's reported vow to use a "hard hand" against the violent protesters, the PNP released the detainees during the evening of October 26 after municipal judge Teresa Morales ruled that Almirante officials did not follow proper procedures in making the arrests. The released detainees claim that the PNP brutally beat them in detention and the media published pictures of their injuries.

17. (SBU) On October 27, SUNTRACS formally asked the Ombudsman's office to investigate. The Ombudsman's office, which sent a fact-finding mission to Bocas del Toro to investigate on October 26, plans to ask the PNP's office of internal affairs and the Ministry of Government and Justice for a report. The GOP is maintaining a dialog with Almirante residents, who acknowledge that the government has been helpful.

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COMMENT  
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18. (C) The violence reflects poorly on the PNP's ability to maintain order in one of Panama's more remote areas. PNP officers failed to control the crowds and failed to defend themselves from an admittedly violent gang of thugs, leading to a large number of police injuries. PNP detentions did not withstand judicial scrutiny. Gonzalez and some of his cronies are former PNP agents. While Gonzalez and other instigators do not appear to be big time traffickers, the PNP's inability to control even "small fry" in this drug-soaked region looks bad. And one can only speculate why a judge freed all 22 detainees accused of aggravated assault after MOGJ Aleman said publicly that he would take a hard line with violent offenders. To top it off, the evidence suggests that the detainees were abused in police custody. While GOP sources have portrayed the violence as an isolated incident caused by "habitual criminals," violence could reemerge if the GOP cannot put an end to recurring disputes that pit citizens against the Bocas Fruit Company.

19. (C) The alleged participation of Cuban-funded SUNTRACS in the violent protest could portend more opportunistic violence. SUNTRACS led violent protests in Panama City in September 2003 following the dismissal of Social Security Chief Ian Jovane. Nonetheless, fears by rank-and-file PNP officers that the release of the protesters augurs open season on PNP officers appear overblown.

MCMULLEN